

Partners in Prevention and Education

Facilitator: Lori Iverson

Panelists:

Bequi Livingston, Lead Field Coordination, Southwest Fire Use Training Academy

Terri Wildermuth, Firewise

Ed Brunson, Fire Education Director, The Nature Conservancy

Bequi Livingston

Bequi began her session with a brief background of her firefighting and public relations career that led to her being hired in 1994 as one of four “Fire Communicators” for the Cibola National Forest. At first it was unclear what the position did, as it was not prevention and not management.

While attending her first public meeting for a planned prescription fire in Albuquerque, her role became clear and defined in her own mind. The audience was hostile and unfriendly because they had not had the opportunity to provide input for the fire planning. They were scared and uneasy because they did not know what the results of the planned fire would be. After seeing her uniformed colleague make no headway trying to explain the benefit of fire, she realized there was a large gap in communication and set out to change it. During subsequent meetings with the public she worked to change the prescription of the fire to include a firebreak that the homeowners could help design. Once included in the decision-making process and further educated about fire ecology, the residents felt more a part of the process and even helped out as volunteers during the burn.

Her Lessons Learned:

- Education – The government agencies must improve internal and external education to make sure everybody affected knows what is going on.
- Interagency Cooperation – Involve everybody possible - federal, state and local fire organizations and community organizations as appropriate – distribute as widely as possible.
- Public Involvement – Participation is key and it helps the public to become stakeholders in a project. Media should also be included, involving them in training and fires brings this group in as stakeholders as well.
- Notification – Be creative, go beyond normal television, radio, or newspaper notification - try offbeat graphics, posters, and fliers.
- Be Proactive – Network and work together to be prepared.

Terri Wildermuth

Terri recently retired from the New Mexico Forestry Division where she served as a public affairs specialist who worked in the Firewise Program, a fire education effort that seeks to train trainers who will instill fire safe practices in their communities by having meetings and trying to effect change.

After training in Prescott, Arizona one of her first challenges was to set up a two-day workshop in Ruidoso, a high fire risk community in south central New Mexico. Her first question was how were they going to get people to attend as many residents only lived there part-time and did not

understand fire, while others were not keen to cut down or remove shade trees and other flammable vegetation. She knew it was going to be difficult to reach many of the residents.

One of her solutions was to try to attract all kinds of Ruidoso residents from landscapers and real estate people to civic leaders and elected officials--people who could take the fire prevention message back to their colleagues who were builders, city officials, etc. The desired end result was safe zoning, fire safe structures and defensible space. Instead of presenting a two-day meeting, knowing many business people cannot afford to take two days off, Terry decided to hold the same meeting on two separate days. She also sought out a local person to be the coordinator for the meeting, bringing more acceptance from the community.

After the success at Ruidoso, other people came to her and asked how they could have Firewise Workshops in their communities. She helped develop flier templates and taught them how to reach out into the community. Successful workshops were held in Chama, Angel Fire, Taos, Santa Fe and Silver City.

When working with these individuals she asked them how they wanted to get people's attention and they came up with the slogan, "Cerro Grande Can Happen Here." The workshops were organized to have speakers from the local community in the mornings and training in the afternoon. They also had demonstrations of equipment to prevent or fight fires. Through her efforts, Firewise is becoming well known in New Mexico.

Ed Brunson

The Nature Conservancy is the largest environmental conservation organization in the world holding 1.3 million acres in 35 countries, with 3,500 total staff and 1,500 land preserves. It has a history of owning and managing land to conserve it for biodiversity values. They use a planning approach called Conservation By Design, strategizing to set land management priorities through eco-regional planning. They design management strategies that involve fire management, effect conservation action and measure success.

Eco-regional planning often involves planning in large conservation landscapes with significant fire issues. Much of their land is in Fire Regimes II and III, and convincing partners that fire is part of the ecosystem is in their management strategy. The focus is not on fire prevention but applied fire and fire ecology. In 2002, the Nature Conservancy carried out 70,000 acres of prescribed burns that totaled 4-5 percent of the land they own.

They also depend on partnerships with NPS, BLM, USFWS, USFS and BIA as well as offering many traditional training courses. They partner extensively with the National Interagency Prescription Fire Training Center. One of The Nature Conservancy's key future needs is to educate managers, career employees, communities, and decision-makers about the role of fire in land management. Ed also believes that there needs to be a better network of communications staff, educating managers as spokespersons and being prepared to make the best use of seasonal educational opportunities.

For the future, the Nature Conservancy is looking at connecting their staff with Firewise, improving training and education efforts, building on their international capacities and utilizing

community-based fire projects and education platforms. He summed up his presentation by saying, "Look at things on the ground. Where partners stand on the ground together, differences disappear."